

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY**

**Similar to mythology of other cultures, North American Indian myths were created to help explain the world around them and communicate what the culture valued and feared. There are a variety of myths from this culture because of the different tribes or areas from which they were created. There are ten different geographic areas where the North American Indians lived: Arctic, Subarctic, Northwest Coast, California, Southwest, Great Basin, Plateau, Plains, Southeast, and Northeast. Even though each area created their own myths, many myths were shared among areas--despite the language barrier.**

**The importance of animals in the lives of the North American Indians is reflected by the common usage of them in their myths. In fact, many tribes refer to the "myth age" as an age of animals. They believed that animals were somewhat human in nature, yet still very dangerous and unpredictable. Consequently, the animals are most often the "tricksters", instead of the heroes, in myths.**

**In North American Indian mythology, myths are mostly about "hero" gods. Specifically, there are two types of hero gods:**

- 1) Culture Hero - provides dry land, makes rivers, sets the sun on its course, creates humans, makes important discoveries, etc.**
- 2) Transformer - provides food by transforming people into game animals, delivers the Indians from man-eating monsters by reducing them in size or transforming them into stones, etc.**

**Occasionally, the hero god is also the trickster in the myth. Then, the title "trickster-transformer" is used to describe him. Characteristics like this make North American Indian myths very unique and interesting to learn about.**

## HOW MAN OBTAINED FIRE

### GREEK MYTH

In the great war between the Olympians and the Titans, one Titan named Prometheus sided with the Olympians. To thank Prometheus for helping the Olympians defeat the Titans, Zeus assigned him the very important task of creating man. Prometheus took this assignment very seriously. After much thought, he began modeling the first man with a handful of earth and water. Much time was taken to shape and mold the detailed human. Upon the completion of man, Prometheus was very pleased and wished to give the greatest gift of all to him. He wished to give man a gift that would help man improve and develop the world, as well as insure his survival. Soon he thought of the perfect gift—fire!

Only the gods had fire. If man were to obtain it, the gods feared he would become too powerful. Prometheus knew how the gods felt, but was determined to obtain this remarkable gift for his remarkable creation. Stealthily, he crept into the chambers of Hephaestus, the God of Fire, and stole a flame from the hearth. He carefully placed it in the hollow stem of a reed, and blocked both ends of the reed with clay so that the flame would smoulder but not die. He quickly sped back to earth before he could be seen by the gods. However, when Zeus looked down upon the earth and saw fires glowing, he was furious! It wasn't long before Zeus found out it was Prometheus who had stolen fire from the gods and given it to man. Although Prometheus suffered severe punishment for this act, he never regretted providing mankind with the greatest gift of all - fire.



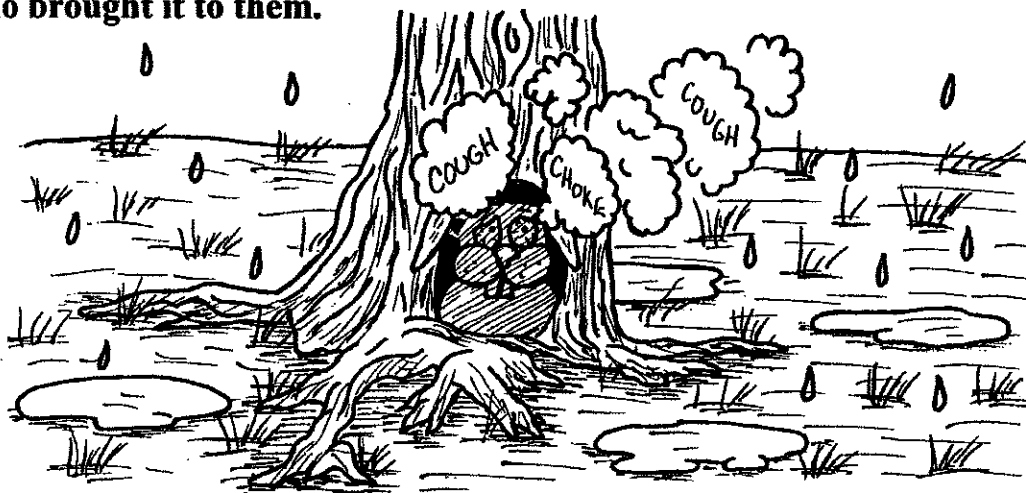
## **HOW MAN OBTAINED FIRE**

### **NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN MYTH**

The Sky People were going to celebrate Puskita, the Green Corn Festival of purification. This celebration would take place in the village square, the only place where fire was allowed. For some time, Rabbit felt that fire should be allowed in other places too. He decided to attend the celebration where the fire would be, and do something about it.

When Rabbit arrived at the celebration, everyone was dancing around the sacred fire logs. Rabbit had his friends rub his head with pine until his hair stood straight up in the air. Then, he jumped right in and started dancing around the fire. Everyone was so impressed by his new crested headdress that they made him the leader of the dance. Rabbit was known for dancing quite extravagantly, and so no one even noticed when he bent down low and caught his headdress on fire. Then, he ran away so fast, no one could catch him if they tried.

When the Sky People realized their fire had been stolen, they were very upset. They quickly worked magic and made a great rain, which lasted four days. By then, they thought the stolen fire would be put out. Meanwhile, Rabbit had hidden in a hollow tree and made a fire there. When the rain stopped, Rabbit came out of the tree and lit new fires. Pretty soon, people were sharing their fire with others. Eventually, everyone was allowed to have fire, and Rabbit was remembered as the one who brought it to them.



## BORROWED OR ORIGINAL IDEA?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** After reading the Greek and North American Indian myths, “How Man Obtained Fire”, state your opinion on whether you agree with the researchers that the North American Indians borrowed the idea for their myth from the Greeks, or disagree because you believe it was their own original idea that just happened to share a few similarities with the Greek myth. Make sure you use specific examples from the myths to support your position. Be persuasive!

[illegible]